enhanced understanding of Maya thought and a pot-pourri of new interpretations to ponder.

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BLANTON, RICHARD E. *et al. Ancient Oaxaca: the Monte Albán state* (Case stud. early Soc.). x, 153 pp., illus., maps, bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1999. £32.50 (cloth), £10.95 (paper)

No one can accuse the authors of this book of not publishing their archaeological results. As directors of the Valley of Oaxaca survey project in Mexico – one of the most extensive survey projects of recent years – these scholars have published detailed monographs and countless journal articles and book chapters on their data, methods, results and theories. 'Ancient Oaxaca', is a logical next step in their publication programme – a book for undergraduate students. Although this is a laudable decision, a number of stylistic and editorial problems throw up road-blocks to student comprehension.

'Ancient Oaxaca' is a compact and attractively produced book. Illustrations are of good quality and text boxes are used effectively. The first chapter introduces the Mesoamerican past and the authors' approach to early states. Chapter 2, titled 'The valley of Oaxaca: a regional setting for an early state', discusses the environment and cultural evolution up to the founding of Monte Albán around 500 BC. Chapter 3 focuses on the origins of this city, the urban centre that ruled the first state in Oaxaca. Site location, population and urban functions are reviewed, and the authors present Blanton's argument for classifying the city as a 'disembedded capital'.

The processes involved in the evolution of the Monte Albán state are detailed in the fourth chapter ('The great transformation'), which is the heart of the book. Particularly noteworthy is the discussion of how the authors identified three separate hierarchies – settlement, civic/ceremonial and wealth – from their settlement pattern data. The role of agricultural intensification is explored, followed by a section on art, ideology and ritual. The final section in this chapter outlines 'state formation from the perspective of the household'. The fifth chapter brings data and theory together to produce an integrated picture of the rise of Monte Albán. The authors first review traditional theories of state formation – diffusion, conflict theory, cultural ecology and functionalism – and give their views of the usefulness of each for explaining the Oaxaca data. Then they explore 'new theoretical directions' for the data, which translates into the authors' version of a world systems perspective.

Although 'Ancient Oaxaca' has a number of useful and positive features, the book is flawed by stylistic and editorial problems. The prose sounds as if it were written by a committee, with successive paragraphs sometimes contradicting one another. Some maps and figures are not well keyed to the text. Several topics are introduced anew more than once, and the later passages fail to refer back to the prior sections This is confusing to students, who may not understand the connection, for example, between the discussion of world systems issues in chapter 5 and the initial description of world systems theory in chapter 1. In several places the authors take pains to criticize particular interpretations of Oaxacan cultural evolution without explicitly stating who they are arguing with or why. These cryptic sections distract from the flow of the presentation, and their purpose may be puzzling to many readers; Mesoamericanists, however, will known that they are part of a debate with Joyce Marcus and Kent Flannery, authors of 'Zapotec civilization' (Thames & Hudson 1996). Readers may want to know why these two books, covering the same survey and excavation data, come to different conclusions about cultural evolution in Oaxaca. These editorial lapses are unfortunate because the data and theories presented in 'Ancient Oaxaca' are important and deserve to be aired for audiences other than Mesoamerican specialists.

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BROWN, A.G. *Alluvial geoarchaeology: floodplain archaeology and environmental change* (Camb. Man. Archaeol.). xxii, 377 pp., illus., maps, tables, bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1997. £55.00 (cloth), £19.95 (paper)

In a Cambridge University Press brochure, Brown's work is announced as a comprehensive technical manual 'designed to give archaeologists the necessary background knowledge in environmental science required to excavate and analyse archaeological sites by rivers and on floodplains' This goal, only vaguely articulated in the text itself, makes its author's efforts intelligible in a way that a first reading does not. Part of the structural problem is that the author's concept of geoarchaeology is somewhat idiosyncratic; for the book's first half it is equivalent to 'archaeological geology', after which the tenor changes and becomes more practical, but closes, jarringly, with models of modern response to floodplain risks and discussion of perception and place-name origins. Of little help is the introductory case study of the River Nile, designed 'to illustrate the overall theme of the book, i.e. how geological, geomorphological

and hydrological methods can be used in alluvial archaeology' (p. 5). What follows is a derivative fluvial history, interjected with annoyingly casual comments on sometimes presumed impacts of high or low floods, and simplistic ENSO interpretations, but not a word on geoarchaeological problems inherent to the Nile Valley.

Yet despite infelicitous introduction and unconventional conclusion, this is a serious and substantial study. A rigorous synopsis of fluvial geomorphology is grounded in the author's wealth of field experience. Elements of fluvial architecture and chronostratigraphy are identified and explained, with reference both to fluvial processes and the context of archaeological sites. Floodplain vegetation and its hydrological controls, then palaeoecology and taphonomy are discussed; this fairly novel integration is of substantial value in understanding a variety of bioarchaeological principles.

Part 2, on applications, begins with artefacts from alluvial contexts, reviewing the familiar, British terrace gravels, and then dealing with a range of North American alluvial sites of younger age, without however attempting synthesis. A section on 'Australasian alluvial geoarchaeology' is a brief but effective summary of three Australian study areas, with lucid explanation as to why there is little visible evidence of historical alluviation since 1788. The book moves on to classic issues of Holocene alluvial history in Britain, and to fresher ground with sites buried in Late Bronze and Iron Age, or historical alluvium on the British Isles. Treatment of the Mediterranean Basin is less satisfactory, providing little clarity in regard to the consequences of soil erosion. Under the heading of 'Managed floodplains', a range of interesting features, such as irrigation, managed flood-meadows, fish weirs, watermills, river channelization and drainage, are introduced, discussing their impact on hydrology. 'Cultural archaeology of floodplains' brings the reader up to the present with a medley of subjects, often interesting, sometimes odd, broadly related to the positive and negative aspects of floodplain settlement, matters that spill over into the concluding chapter

This book is rich in information and offers fresh insights on a number of neglected or unfamiliar themes. It gives the reader access to a wealth of related studies, although not necessarily with the contextual information that would allow critical evaluation. Just as the author's inadequate explication of presentation strategies impedes ready use of the book, his concluding chapter discussions are too brief to develop potential applications in a systematic way.

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CLASSEN, CHERYL. *Shells* (Camb. Man. Archaeol.). xiv, 266 pp., illus., maps, tables, bibliogr. Cambridge: Univ. Press, 1998. £50.00 (cloth), £17.95 (paper)

Shells is a reference guidebook on shells found in archaeological contexts intended primarily for field archaeologists and other professionals working in laboratory and museum settings and for their students. A contribution to the Cambridge Manuals in Archaeology series, the author's goal is to offer complete coverage of the topic, never before the subject of a comprehensive survey of this scope.

Topics include an overview of the archaeology of shell matrix sites, including a summary of the known prehistoric record, the history of archaeological research and variations in site types (ch. 1); the biology of shelled animals, principally molluscs but also barnacles and echinoderms (ch. 2); the taphonomy of shell and shell assemblages (ch. 3); site sampling techniques and methods for quantifying shells (ch. 4); methods for reconstructing palaeoenvironments (ch. 5), determining the season of death of molluscs (ch. 6, and for dietary reconstructions ch. 7); the shell as artefact (ch. 8); and shells as archaeological indicators of prehistoric social organization (ch. 9).

In short, Claassen leaves no shell unturned, but not all topics receive equal treatment. For example, chapter 2, on biology, is disappointing because the biological variations of shell-bearing animals are so vast that they could not be summarized adequately in a book of this scope. Claassen's solution, however, is a superficial treatment of a complex subject which has relatively little utility for the archaeologist. But this weakness is more than offset by the other chapters, which have the merit of covering their subject matter thoroughly and well, thereby inviting readers to contemplate alternative issues that might otherwise be overlooked. For instance, in chapter 3 Claassen identifies a wide range of mechanical and chemical processes that can destroy the integrity of individuals shells, the several non-human biotic and edaphic formation processes that create shell-piles (which might be mistaken for archaeological sites), and the gamut of agents of disturbance and erosion of all shell accumulations.

Another example of unevenness occurs in chapter 6, which discusses three methods for determining the age of death of molluscs in archaeological sites: demography, oxygen isotope and incremental growth line analysis. Here Claassen provides a detailed and critical discussion of growth line studies, which she argues is the most widely used method. The discussion also clearly benefits from that fact that this is an area of her own expertise. Regrettably, however, the other two methods are not discussed with the same